

Special issue: Innovative Teaching Personal Essays

Good Things Come to Those Who Go: Vulnerability in Teaching and Leading Study Tours Abroad

Robin Selzer

University of Cincinnati

I have something to confess. I'm an undercover risk-adverse person. Now this is pretty difficult to admit for someone who sees herself as an ambitious doer, a mover and shaker, and high achiever. This all came to a head for me in the past several years when I got involved with courses that included study tours abroad. You see, I didn't travel outside of the United States growing up, not like kids these days. I got my passport when I was 29 because I pushed myself to study abroad in Rome, Italy, as part of a doctoral class with Loyola University Chicago. I dislike flying and have great fears of the plane crashing (shout out to the television show *LOST*). I really stink at geography and am directionally-challenged with a map. So, over the past year, when I decided I was NOT going to make fear-based decisions, I created and led my first study tour abroad. I wanted to take this on because it would challenge me personally and transform my teaching.

In my previous two experiences with study tours abroad to Scotland and Iceland, I was able to ride on the coattails of my magnificent colleague, Kevin Grace, as his mentee. This next time flying solo felt like jumping out of an airplane without a parachute. Who am I kidding, I would never jump out of an airplane! That's for crazy risk-takers. But seriously, would my students know that I make the sign of the cross on the door of every airplane I enter? Would they see me reciting the Lord's Prayer over and over in my head when there's the slightest bump in the air? Typically, I'd order a big glass of red wine or 10, but that's probably not appropriate with students. So, my innovation journey was not just a teaching innovation, but a personal transformation as well.

Beyond flying, there are other aspects of adventurer imposter syndrome that have occurred when I was a part of previous study tours. I remember being in an underground lava cave in Reykjavik, Iceland, with students. "Just go down the hole," the guides said. So, despite immediately wondering if claustrophobia would set in, I went down the icy hole guided by a rope. And then it got worse. In the

dark, cold cave, the only way to the other side was to roll (yes, like stop, drop, and roll) or move sideways in plank position through the low, small, long crevice. The students were stoked and started rolling on through. I, on the other hand, was not sure if I could do it. I kept hearing them laugh out loud and yell, “Woohoo, this is amazing!” I started to panic and looked at the hole to see if I could climb back up the rope. Nope. I was the last one, but I ended up rolling through that damn crevice. And then they proceeded to tell ghost stories in the pitch-black dark...seriously?!

Who would have known that rolling through that crevice gave me the courage to create my own study tour? The Iceland course focused on world folklore and culture. Kevin had given me a book back then on Mexican folklore and healing called, *Curandero*. It turns out that when I designed my own course and worked with Child Family Health International (the 3rd party host organization), I would be traveling to Oaxaca, Mexico, and experiencing the spiritual rituals of Curandismo. Despite my risk-aversion, I thought this must be the universe telling me to push through my fears and launch this new study tour course. All of my previous experiences had prepared me for it; and I knew it was going to be an amazing learning experience for all of us.

The new course focused on global health, an area where I had no degree and had only self-studied the subject matter, but I had learned that when you courageously follow your intuition to be innovative, you can still lean on others. I found another mentor with expertise in global health, Jason Blackard. He helped with the course and co-led the study tour. He also happened to be an extensive global traveler (cue the imposter syndrome). We learned so much from our collaboration about how folks trained in the natural sciences don't often work with the social sciences, but should. A medical school research faculty member working with a faculty member who teaches undergraduate career education and experiential learning together created an innovative teaching and learning dynamic. Interdisciplinarity became a bit of a buzzword in academic circles, so while this may not seem innovative at first glance, realizing the synthesis of seemingly disparate disciplines in practice is much more difficult- and can lead to some real personal innovation.

The class was a great success, and I learned it's true that if you build it, they will come. Carol Dweck, a Psychologist, writes about “the growth mindset” as a desire to learn by embracing challenges and seeing effort as a path to mastery. For me, cultivating a growth mindset will help me the next time there is an opportunity to lead a study tour; I may not run towards it, but I will go forward, remembering all that got me to where I am.

Here's the thing though. I do wonder if other faculty doing this work feel the same way as I do, especially when my mentors are such seasoned travelers. Why haven't I felt comfortable sharing this

stuff? Is it because I am being vulnerable and that makes me feel like less of an expert (not typically accepted with open arms by faculty)? Is it because I am a woman, and it makes me feel less capable than men? One thing I do know is that I followed my intuition when writing this piece, being mentored by Kevin and Jason, and creating and leading my own study tour course—and that feels like innovative teaching. Innovative teaching is moving out of your comfort zone to teach new content in new ways. I plan to sustain this growth mindset and personal innovation by continuing to take risks to teach and lead study tours in interdisciplinary ways by reading books and articles suggested by colleagues outside of my field, like I did with Curandero.

Just as I have grown and learned from my mentors, I hope others can learn from me that sometimes the only way to get there is to go do what the universe is telling you to do in your teaching despite your fears. Dr. Suess once famously said, “Oh the places, you’ll go!” Well, I certainly agree now more than ever and have learned that good things come to those who go.

References

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